

Variants of Comprehension of the “Own” and the “Alien” in Anglo-American Literature of the End of the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT. The problem of encounter – meeting/conflict of the “own” and the “alien” became especially actual in Anglo-American literature of the end of the XIXth century due to the increasing tension in relations between the newly-born American nation and Old Europe on the threshold of World War I. The brightest examples of encounter depiction are revealed in the works by O. Wilde (*The Canterville ghost*), H. James (*Daisy Miller*) and M. Twain (*Innocents abroad*).

This study concentrates on the analysis of three works with the similar plot-lines – the arrival of American “innocents”, having “new”, free-from-prejudice, pragmatic and down-to-earth life approach, to the Old World where they have to face the “old”, traditional cultural and moral values. Special attention is paid to O. Wilde’s complication of the subject-matter of his story due to the specific choice of the main character – a supernatural being. Thus, the range of problems in “The Canterville ghost” increases from the real conflict of the English (“own”) and the American (“alien”) to the encounter of the material and the ideal, of poetical literary world of fantasy and romance and reality.

The researcher makes the conclusion that the works represent three different views on the encounter problem and the ways of its solution, influenced by the writers’ origin and their own interest in the certain party of the encounter which they belonged to by birth – “English” (O. Wilde), “transatlantic” (H. James) and “American” (M. Twain). H. James’ view appears to be the most pessimistic – the compromise of the “own” and the “alien” is impossible. M. Twain’s innocents admit the great value of the Old World’s cultural achievements. However, their victory over utilitarian attitude to life is an isolated case contrasting with overall pragmatism. O. Wilde’s view seems to be the most positive: his characters return to the Old World’s historical and cultural traditions and to the wonderful poetic world created by the European literature. However, the story itself is presented in a form of ironic, parodical play with the clichés of Gothic literature which shows artificiality and illusiveness of the depicted events and impossibility of their embodiment in real life.

1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the nineteenth century is historically known as the period of development of intercultural connections and simultaneous strengthening of tension in the relations of leading world powers—England, Russia, Germany and the USA. The strivings of the leading intellectuals of the age to the comprehension of the reasons of cross-cultural conflicts and to the search of possibilities for intercultural dialogue find their literary reflection in the problem of encounter—meeting/conflict of the “own” and the “alien”, which became especially popular in Anglo-American literature. As a specific aspect of this problem, the relations between America as new quickly-rising nation and “old” Europe steadily moving to World War I were considered. The problem of encounter between “old” European and “new” American societies was of special interest for Oscar Wilde, Henry James and Mark Twain, finding its embodiment in the writers’ works (*The Canterville Ghost*, 1887; *Daisy Miller*, 1878; *Innocents Abroad*, 1867).

Wilde’s small humoristic story was written after the author’s one-year stay in America where the leader of aestheticism had to encounter all the features of the “alien” lifestyle. Typical

traits of the American worldview—positivistic attitude to the surrounding reality and pragmatism—are embodied in the images of the Otis family members who bought an ancient English castle. There the Otises face a paradoxical encounter with the guardian of the “old” culture—a ghost of the former chase owner. James, born in America and having moved to Europe, reflects his own “transatlantic” experience in the narration about the sojourn of a young American girl in the European society. The author reveals harmfulness of the European moral code which binds living energy of the “new” nation representative with a set of strict rules and “...ritual gestures, hiding senselessness, hypocrisy, deception, intrigues” (Anastas’ev 107). Twain’s novel is also based on the writer’s life-experience. According to his view, the American characters during their one-year tour around the Old World not only stop mocking the Europeans’ beliefs and superstitions, but also gradually perceive the spiritually elevated atmosphere of the European rich history and culture. Pragmatic representatives of the “new” nation learn to cherish the heritage of the bygone past.

2. THE ENCOUNTER OF THE “OWN” AND THE “ALIEN” IN ENGLISH, “TRANSATLANTIC” AND AMERICAN PROJECTIONS

The titles of all three works focus the reader’s attention on the names of the main characters, but the difference is in the authors’ choice: James’ and Twain’s heroes are real Americans of the end of the nineteenth century and Wilde’s hero is a ghost of an English feudal of the prosperous period of the English absolutism. Such choice seems to be determined by the authors’ position and projection—American (Twain), “transatlantic” (James) and English (Wilde).

Apart from the similar plot line (arrival of Americans to the Old World) and the same problem of encounter the factor uniting three works, different in genre and aesthetic message, is the principle of depiction of the American characters as people with “simple” worldview, or “innocents”, “...free from any prejudices...with common sense and pragmatic...” (Anastas’ev 101). According to the statement of M. Anastas’ev, “innocents”, being unaware of their spiritual connection with the Old World, regard rich historical and cultural heritage and traditional values of the European society from the point of view of “100-percent American” (Anastas’ev 107). The very word “innocent” is in Twain’s title of the novel. Thus, the American author reveals the way in which he wants the reader to accept his “innocent” fellow-citizens, giving an ironic estimation of European sightseeings.

The word and notion of “innocence” appears in James’ work too. His main character (an American immigrant to Europe) says that “Miss Daisy Miller looked extremely innocent. Some people had told him that...American girls were exceedingly innocent” (James 314). The feelings of the “innocent” American were “pure and wholesome”, but she “was wholly oblivious of the conventions which governed a nice girl’s conduct in Europe...” (Bayley xvi). Strict moral rules of the European society are contradicted by innocence and openness of the beautiful American girl. Even her name shows the purity of her soul: daisy is the name of the flower symbolizing beauty, youth and freshness (ABBY Lingvo dictionary).

In Wilde’s story the notion of “innocent” is implicit, it is associated only with the name and image of the Americans’ daughter—Virginia. According to the plot, the girl proves to be the only member of her family capable of accepting the Canterville ghost and helping him to go to eternal rest. The semantic core of her name—virgin—can be interpreted in two ways: as a hint to the purity of her soul and that her consciousness, being not burdened by European cultural and spiritual values, appeared to be a specific “tabula rasa” able to accept the achievements of the “old” culture.

The conflict of American “innocence” with traditional European worldview (*The Canterville Ghost*, *Daisy Miller*) and its comparison with the European reception of the surrounding reality in *Innocents Abroad* form a plot core of the works. For example, one of the main devices of Wilde’s irony becomes the discrepancy between Sir Simon’s expectations (and also the reader’s ones) to evoke terror in the Otises’ souls (which could be only natural during the encounter with the supernatural) and what happens in reality. Paradoxical encounter of the highly elevated atmosphere, generated by the supernatural apparition, with the commonplace, down-to-earth innocents’ perception of the phenomenon creates a humoristic effect. The Canterville ghost escapes in terror

from the “Otis ghost”, being unaware that it is an invention of real people. The inventors—young Americans—adapt the “alien”—literary traditions of depiction of the supernatural: ancient Gothic script is used for writing a typical advertising leaflet. Twain also makes a soft humoristic downgrading of the mysterious Romantic atmosphere which surrounds the Old World’s cultural heritage, depicting the latter from the innocent’s point of view. For example, the love story of Abeliar and Eloise transforms into banal life story about an inexperienced girl seduced by a cold-hearted villain. Similarly, James’ heroine shows complete indifference to Bonivar’s sad story during her trip to Shillon.

Surprising indifference of the Americans to the European past is strengthened by their unusual pragmatism. Thus, while visiting the cave with the remnants of pre-historic people “innocent” travelers from “Quaker-City” not only avoid awesome feelings, but also notice from the practical point of view that the cave “...can be of no great public interest” “...as long as those parties can’t vote anymore...” (Twain). In Wilde’s story American pragmatism is most obviously revealed in Mr. Otis’ contemplations that the supernatural creature can become a sightseeing of a public museum or it can be bought “with furniture at a valuation” (Wilde 191). Horror which traditionally overwhelmed the characters of Gothic literature during the encounter with the supernatural is defeated by mercenariness and self-assertion of the representative of the “new” nation.

It is not surprising that the reader begins to believe in the advantage of the “new” American worldview over the obsolete European one, which was formed mainly due to poetic reality of the European literature and, thus, was often incapable of sober evaluation of the rapidly changing world. In Wilde’s story the influence of medieval prejudices is experienced not only by the real Englishmen, but also by the Ghost himself being unaware of differences between the reality and artificially created bookish worlds. However, Wilde’s characters’ behaviour strongly contrasts Twain’s Americans’ impressions of the European places of history, connected with the legends of supernatural. Thus, Dan’s valley (a place which gave birth to many superstitions) “will not throw a well-balanced man into convulsions...”, apples in the valley of the Dead Sea don’t turn into dust and the grapes in Hanaan appear to be small. (Twain).

In all three works American characters seem to be more adapted to life in the world of material values, scientific and technological progress. They possess tireless vitality and a strive for life which cold and ceremonious Europeans are deprived of. Young Otises are unusually noisy and naughty and Daisy’s brother can stay awake all night. Mrs. Otis has a superb profile and Winterbourne is taken aback by “strikingly, admirably pretty” girl with “singularly honest and fresh” eyes (James 308, 310). It seems that energetic Americans suppress the Europeans. The advantage of the U.S. over the Old World is revealed in the characters’ various statements that the best actresses and the most fashionable clothes are in America, Boston is a great cultural centre, American candies and men are the best in the world, and one of Twain’s travelers “...looks wiser than the whole Academy of France” (Twain).

The last achievements of science and technology become inseparably connected with the depiction of bearers of the “new” culture. The Canterville Ghost has to retreat and in the end — submit to the impact of three newly-designed products: Pinkerton’s Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent destroys the bloodstain of supernatural origin, the ghost’s chains are proposed to be oiled by Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator, and when Sir Simon tries to frighten the Americans with his “celebrated peal of demoniac laughter”, he is given Dr Dobell’s tincture for indigestion. Mrs. Miller admits that there is no doctor in the whole Europe, being better than the American doctor Davis. In *Innocents Abroad* the New World’s advantage is implicit, being revealed only in some remarks of the American travelers, such as in complaints about uncomfortable railways and absence of soap in European houses and hotels.

The works reveal special features of perception and interaction between the Old and New Worlds. Wilde’s and James’ Europeans don’t accept the representatives of the “new” nation, considering them wretched, being on a low material level of existence, dreadful, hopelessly vulgar, rather wild and completely uncultivated. Winterbourne’s aunt accuses her nephew of considering

his former compatriot's behavior too innocently ("You are too innocent"); the hero decides after some time that Daisy is not worth his respect, because "...how smartly she played an injured innocence!" (James 319, 359). However, in Twain's novel the situation is opposite: the Europeans themselves are described as wild and uncultivated outcasts from the point of view of civilized Americans, being surprised with boundless superstitions, "the strangest and funniest life" of the Old World's representatives, who are "...perfectly unaware that the world turns round" (Twain).

Nevertheless, the Americans in all three works feel nostalgia about the "alien" (which was previously their "own") — about historical roots, culture and literature of the Old Europe. The Otises, who used to reject the importance of historical and cultural traditions, get involved into them; Daisy, despite her initial disappointment in Rome, soon plunges into contemplations over Pincio gardens and admires the Coliseum's beauty in moonlight. Twain's travelers ironically notice at first that the upheaval of Napoleon III had much more importance for the Ottoman Empire than all the marvels of fiction and the wonders of Aladdin's romantic advantages in the world of Arabian magic. However, the pragmatic Americans suddenly realize that their interest to the European creative art has strengthened manifold.

According to the American author, the trip over the Old World changes the worldview of the "new" nation's representatives: "innocents" acquire the ability to perceive and respect the "alien". The narrator himself changes his attitude to European cultural realia from irony and parody to genuine admiration. Thus, the hero plunges into contemplative tranquility during his contemplations over the landscape view in Lago di Gardi, he discovers Venice full of poetry and romance in moonlight, in Smirna the traveler feels like a character of "one-thousand-and-one-night tales" where his servants are giants and genies. Pragmatic US citizen suddenly acknowledges that "an enchanted memory" about the Holy City "...money could not buy from us" (Twain). Moreover, the hero realizes that all America's achievements can't be compared with the achievements of the Egyptian civilization which "...knew...all of medicine and surgery which science has discovered lately...which had in high excellence...necessities of an advanced civilization..." (Twain).

The American traveler, restoring his ability to admire the achievements of the "old" culture, thus defeats pragmatism and consumptive attitude to life. But this is a singular case which contrasts the whole process of pragmatization of consciousness and utilitarian attitude to spiritual values and traditions. Solution of the "own" and the "alien" collision in "Daisy Miller" is more tragical: the death of the young American girl is burdened by her awareness of being despised even by the former compatriot. The heroine's despair seems to reflect the feelings of the author himself who, like his American characters, had to adapt to the "set of ritual gestures" of the Old World's moral behavior (Anastas'ev 107).

We shouldn't but mention the optimistic tone of the end of the story: Winterbourne acknowledges injustice in his attitude to the girl and his own loss of "innocence", which is naivety, strive to the development of individuality and freedom from strict moral rules. However, this acknowledgement doesn't initiate any changes in the hero's worldview and fate: Winterbourne continues to live according to his previous life pattern under the influence of European moral code. Thus, the "transatlantic" version of encounter doesn't support the possibility of compromise between the "own" and the "alien" and of mutual dialogue between the representatives of the "old" and "new" cultures.

The most optimistic version of the problem seems the one proposed by the Englishman Wilde: his heroes return to the Old World's historical and cultural traditions and to the beautiful literary world created by the European literature. Moreover, they even intermarry with the English aristocrats. However, despite this visibly happy final, the compromise of the "own" and the "alien", the "old" and the "new" remains an illusion. The guardian of the "old" world is buried, the "new" society bids eternal farewell to him. Along with Sir Simon, the whole world of poetry and imagination, which always stimulated human belief in the supernatural and strengthened the ability to poetize reality, seems to go to nonentity. After all, even the story itself is built in the form of ironic parody and play with the clichés of the Gothic literature – the fact which discloses affectation of the events and incapability of their embodiment in reality.

3. CONCLUSION

Confronting the “one-hundred-percent Americans” with the Old World, the English, “transatlantic” and American writers try to realize social situation in the contemporary world, to comprehend the “own” in its contact with the “alien”. According to the Russian scholar S. Ter-Minasova, the human “begins to realize deeper his own culture, his own worldview” in the interrelation with the alien ones (Ter-Minasova 24), and that strengthens his reflection upon the situation in the contemporary society and upon his approach to life on a whole.

All three authors embody their perception of intercultural collisions through the heroes’ life stories. Daisy Miller gets failure in her challenge of European moral rules, Twain’s innocents become aware of the cultural advantage of the Old World over the New World. In Wilde’s story the range of problems becomes more complicated due to the specific choice of the main character: encounter theme is unfolded not only as the conflict of the “own” and the “alien” (English and American), but also as the struggle of the material and the ideal, the “old” traditional and the “new” technocratic worldviews, highly elevated world of fantasy, poetry and matter-of-fact reality. The fact that Wilde ends his story with the paradoxical image of tough-minded and pragmatic English lady trying to get profit from the situation proves that the writer had his own sad version of the universal course of social development.

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